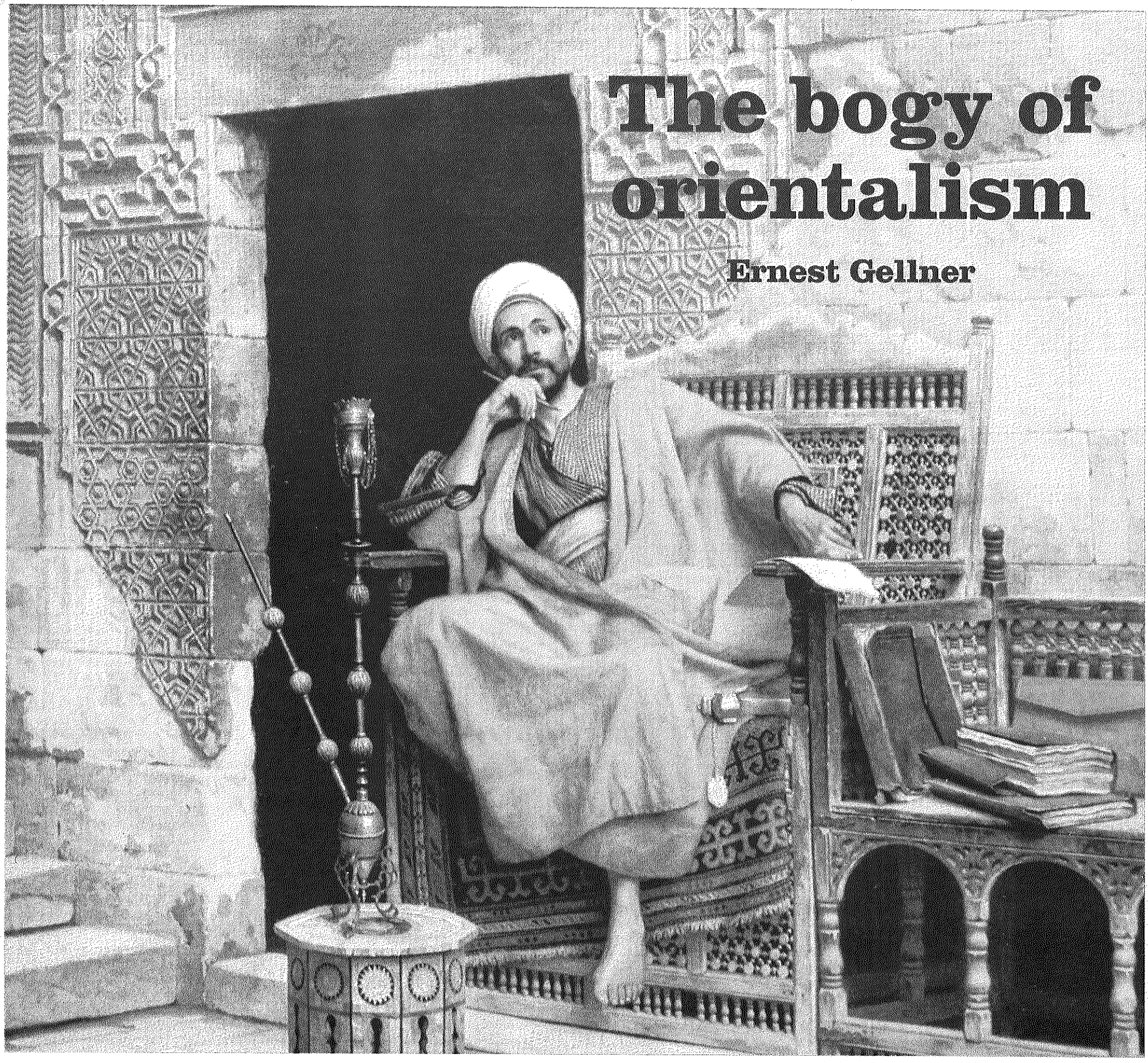

The bogy of orientalism

Ernest Gellner

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The mightier pen?

Edward Said and the double standards of inside-out colonialism

ERNEST GELLNER

Edward W. Said

CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM
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European imperialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, formally dismantled in the twentieth but surviving in many forms, is in certain important ways unique. It wasn't simply a matter of one set of people dominating others, it involved a move from one kind of society to a profoundly different one. It is this deep metamorphosis and the difficulty of finding a viewpoint from which to judge it, which is the real problem of imperialism. It cannot be seen in terms of imperialist-baddies and resister-goodies. No amount of restraint or tolerance on the part of the rulers, no amount of pride, conservatism and stubbornness on the part of the ruled, could avoid at least some measure of a transvaluation of values. By what standards can we judge this? Like the emperor who found Rome brick and left it marble, these conquerors found the world agrarian and left it industrial, or poised to become such. This raises tremendous problems. Their solution is in no way advanced by inventing a bogy called Orientalism – and still less by the insinuation that if the bogy is overcome, all will be made plain.

Note that not one, but at least two overlapping and distinctive cultural contrasts are involved in the process of modern imperialism and of the subsequent decolonization. There is the generic difference between agrarian and industrial society; and there is the difference between "Western" society and the residue of human societies. The two contrasts are independent of each other: we do not know which of the many characteristics of Western societies bestowed on them their temporary predominance. Westerners themselves credited their election, at various times, to Christianity, rationalism, individualism, capitalism, virtue, genes, Marxism, Protestantism, valour, constitutionalism, democracy; and no doubt there have been other candidates. In the course of their domination, social traits of the dominators which may have been totally irrelevant to the situation benefited from a free ride: for instance, European soldiers wore fairly narrow rather than baggy trousers, and modernizing-Westernizing Muslim rulers imitated this sartorial feature, much to the irritation of their own soldiers, who were less smitten by an uncritical general yearning for the West. So they rolled up their trousers in defiance of the West and of their own officers. However, this does not mean that tight trousers are an absolutely essential constituent of human progress; nor does it mean that baggy trousers advance cultural fulfilment.

Moreover, over and above the fact that the industrial/agrarian and Western/Other distinctions cut across each other, and obscure each other's outline, we have by now an additional one which cuts across both: there is a difference between the social and cultural traits which favour advanced industrialism, and those which had made its emergence possible in the first place, before its potential was properly understood. The brilliant economic success of some Far Eastern societies suggests that whereas Calvinist individualism may have favoured the initial appearance of the new order, once it has come into being, and its advantages are clear to all, it can better be run in a Confucian-collectivist spirit. This isn't yet fully established, but it constitutes a distinct possibility.

It is against this background that one has to face the problem of the cultural interaction set off by imperial expansion. What can justify or vindicate the stance which one adopts? If there is, anywhere in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, a discussion of this problem, it has entirely escaped me. Said's own values, as expressed in the culminating passages of the book, are unexceptionable:

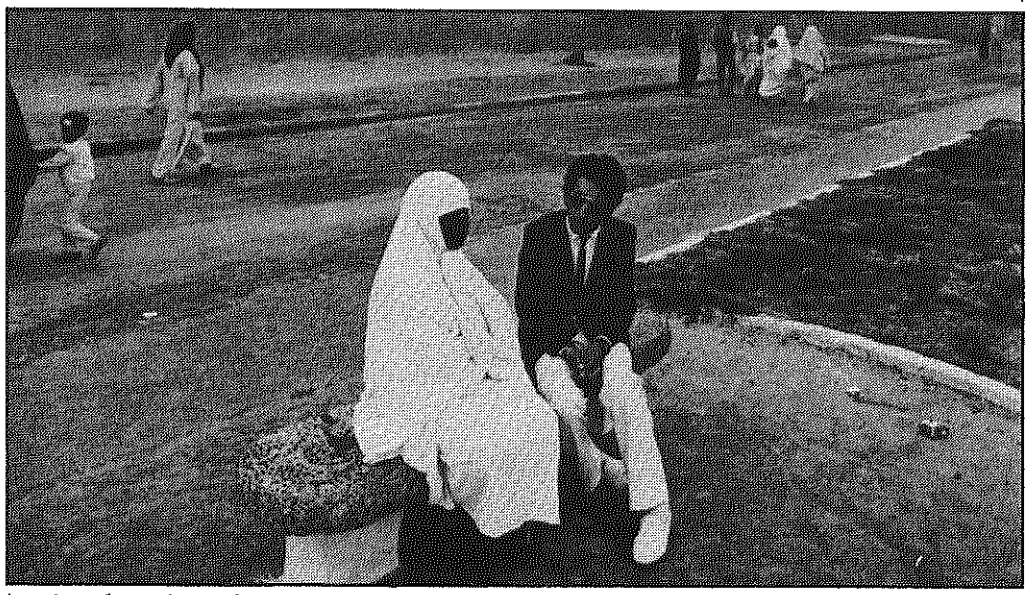
> No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or American, are no more than starting points . . . . Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet . . . [n]o one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions . . . but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about . . . this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them into hierarchies . . . .

Amen. It would be hard to dissent from the underlying moral current of this: we are all human and should treat each other decently and with respect. Don't take more specific classifications seriously. Is categorization between consenting adults to be allowed to all?

But still, there are some things wrong even with this anodyne expression of our shared pieties. Was it really imperialism which first imposed rigid classifications on people? Deeply internalized, socially enforced distinctions between categories of people constituted a general characteristic of complex societies. They were only loosened and partly eroded by that modern turbulence which brought in its train, but is not exhausted by, "imperialism". Mobility, egalitarianism and free choice of identity have better prospects in the modern world than they had in the past. Should there not, on the part of one who seems to value this free, individualist choice of identity, be at least some expression of gratitude towards the process which has made such a free choice so much easier – even if it also for a time engendered an initial disparity of power between early and later beneficiaries of modernity?

Another way of putting it would be to say that Said's entire approach is based on four assumptions: (1) The recent domination of the world by the West can be seen as an event in its own right, rather than as primarily an aspect of the transformation of the world by a new technology, economy and science – which happens, owing to the uneven nature of its diffusion, to engender a temporary and unstable imbalance of power; (2) the cruelties and injustices which take place between early and late beneficiaries of the new power are somehow worse or more reprehensible than those which customarily take place *within* either traditional or modernized societies; (3) these inequalities are reflected in the culture and literatures of the societies affected, which deserves attentive investigation; and (4) these cultural aspects of the imbalance of power were essential to it, and not mere superficial accompaniments. Of the four assumptions, 1, 2 and 4 seem to me at the very least questionable and probably false, whereas 3 is unquestionably sound. The trouble is, Said doesn't even seriously raise, let alone answer, questions concerning 1 and 2; one must gladly concede 3; and as to 4, he emphatically affirms it, but fails to establish it. I have grave doubts about it.

The book offers no general discussion of the nature of cultural transformation, or contact and conflict of values, nor does it offer a theory of how, given competing viewpoints, we can legitimately claim objectivity for our own moral or cognitive stance. Nineteenth-century evolutionism, which Said repudiates, offered an ingenious solution, which on the one hand recognized cultural variety, yet on the other provided a basis for judgment: cultures were ranked on an evolutionary ladder, and the upward struggle along it endowed life and history with meaning. All cultures were legitimate but later ones more so. This imposed a ranking on cultures, which is unacceptable to Said, though ranking, as such, can be separated from the Eurocentric versions once prevalent, and a non-Eurocentric form of the theory may yet find favour.



A mathematics teacher and companion, Fête du Trône, Essaouira, from Owen Logan's *Al Maghrib: Photographs from Morocco* (45pp. Polygon. Paperback, £14.99. 0 7486 6013 5)

The prevalent mood of expiation for empire is often associated with a wild subjectivism, which would happily endorse *all* cultures (which leads to a contradiction, by endorsing the ethnocentric absolutism found within so many of them). Said never goes that far: there is no shrill "post-modernist" pan-relativism in his book. He simply makes himself a present of a stance from which he can pass moral judgment and tell us how things really stand, without facing the difficulties of validating it. If the colonialists were victims of their cultural situation, what warrant is there for Said's own cultural location? Having rejected evolutionist ranking, yet without espousing the voguish relativism which blesses everything (in practice, selectively), Said is left with an objectivism which hangs in thin air, without support, but allows him to explain and put down the "Orientalists", and reduce their vision to the allegedly important role it played in world domination.

I fear that this kind of unsustained, facile inverse colonialism has grave dangers for the moral sensibility of anyone practising it: for instance, genuine and outstanding scholars who have made important contributions to the understanding of non-Western societies, without the least touch of condescension (for instance, Bernard Lewis, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook) are unfairly denounced; by contrast, Said accepts someone like Thomas Hodgkin, who practised a kind of inside-out Blimpery, and mechanically endorsed and underwrote a catastrophic and comic Third World dictator, Nkrumah, simply because he spoke radical and was not Western. Hodgkin is repeatedly invoked as if he were a serious witness concerning the correct relationship between East and West, or North and South. Said fails to see that the double standard implied in the tacitly patronizing attitude of such men (tenderly condoning sins in their heroes which would be excoriated at home) is far more genuinely and deeply insulting than a dispassionate analysis of other cultures.

Said incidentally lets off the founding fathers of Marxism far too easily. It is not enough to refer to "their theories of Oriental and African ignorance and superstition". Without ever formally systematizing it, Marx and Engels came very close to having two distinct theories of history, one for Europe, the other for the Rest. In the West, all class-endowed societies are in the end said to be unstable and bound to perish through their own contradictions, so guaranteeing eventual salvation; in the East, genuine stagnation is possible and obtains, as does the primacy of coercion over production, which inhibits the liberation of mankind through growth of productive forces and the consequent adjustments in society. So the East can only be liberated by courtesy of the West. This Eurocentrism continued, for instance, to be markedly present in Sartre, who, though supposed to be on the side of the angels, considered the dialectic to be a European speciality, extended to others by courtesy – a kind of *mission dialectisante*, or Left Bank's Burden? – and he was rightly rebuked for this by Lévi-Strauss. Eurocentric blinkers are not restricted to the political right.

So Said does not really face the problems of moral-historical accountancy in the transformation of the world, yet allows himself judgments which presuppose that these questions have been answered. If he evades yet prejudges the general issues, how does he fare on details? I have had a special look at his extensive handling of North Africa, partly because my own ignorance is less complete in this field than elsewhere, and partly because the interface of two confident cultures, Arab and French, each with a tendency to absolutize itself (each believes its own language to reflect the true order of things), does indeed present a marvellous and revealing example of cultural confrontation, and Said rightly gives it much attention.

Looking at the manner in which he handles this theme, I am struck by how much is left out, how much is misleading, and how much is mistaken. André Gide naturally makes his appearance: *L'Immoraliste* is a gift to anyone pursuing this

theme, and Gide himself a sitting duck: few men have more shamelessly used another country as a name for their own fantasy. No doubt it was easier to find attractive homosexual partners in Biskra than among the *haute bourgeoisie protestante*, but this does not mean that the Algerian oasis was a residue of ancient Mediterranean sensuous harmony, liberty and fulfilment. Said here fails to pursue his quarry as it deserves to be pursued, and misses out on how terribly wrong Gide was, how shamelessly he used Algeria for a projection based on his own need. Said fails to show up Gide fully because, like Gide, he also is more interested in his own theme than in the Algerians. In *L'Immoraliste*, and in *Si le grain ne meurt* for that matter, Gide's underlying argument is: it was northern Protestantism which forced me, Gide, to deny my true nature and my fulfilment, a Protestant symbolized by those dreadful pines and the declamatory landscape and puritanism of the Swiss Alps. But ah, as I move south, things improve, they get quite nice in southern Italy, and the final release takes place among the palm trees of Biskra, where an Apollonian shrine consecrates a liberated spirit . . . . Gide adapted and eroticized the hymn to Nature found in that compendium of the Enlightenment, d'Holbach's *System of Nature*, to convey his vision.

Gide is entitled to his personal parables. But what a travesty of the realities! At the very moment he was celebrating his own sensuous liberation, a movement was starting, not at all far from Biskra (one leader came from that very region, and another from an adjoining area a little to the north), destined to turn Algeria into the Eire of the Muslim world, a nation whose identity was forged around a severely puritan, scripturalist version of an old faith, previously held in a more relaxed, quasi-pagan spirit. But even if one took the unreformed version of Algerian culture, it hardly exemplifies the kind of free, naturalistic fulfilment Gide commended: one much admired traditional folk-hero of the Kabyles, for instance, is a man who kills his own daughter for unchastity; a display of the virtue of a Roman judge, but at the service of purity rather than justice, if indeed such a distinction can be drawn.

Said fails to exploit properly the disparity between Gide's self-indulgent projection and Algerian reality because he himself is more concerned with his general thesis – literature at the service of colonialism, or of resistance to it – than with the concrete society with which he is dealing. Ben Badis, the puritan reformer who really forged the modern Algerian moral climate and identity (and whose base was a little north of Biskra, in Constantine), is not even mentioned. Instead, there is a lot about Frantz Fanon. Here, Said misses the point that Fanon was for export only: influential though he no doubt was in the international literary-intellectual scene, he meant nothing to the Algerians themselves (whereas Ben Badis, unknown internationally, meant a very great deal). The Algerian war, lost on the ground, was won in the arena of international opinion, and here Fanon was invaluable; but he made no contribution to the content of Algerian life or thought. Said, commendably, doesn't care for nationalism too much, and hopes that decolonization will lead to something better; and he finds support in Fanon's views:

> [Fanon's] notion was that unless national consciousness at its moment of success is somehow changed into social consciousness, the future would hold not liberation but an extension of imperialism . . . . The struggle must be lifted to a new level of contest, a synthesis represented by a war of liberation, for which an entirely new post-nationalist theoretical culture is required.

How this could relate to reality is less than clear. Certainly, nothing of the kind happened. On the ground, the Algerians turned, not to a "new post-nationalist theoretical culture", but to fundamentalism, which in the Muslim context plays the same social role as nationalism does in Europe: it provides men deprived of their niche in the old stable local structures with an identity in a high culture, one that confers dignity. Said misdescribes the process: "In Algeria . . . the French forbade Arabic as a formal language of instruction or administration; after 1962 the FLN made it understandably the only such language . . . . The FLN then proceeded politically to absorb the whole of Algerian civil society . . . ."

None of this is right. The moral climate of Muslim Algeria was transformed during the earlier part of the century by a Reformist puritan movement led by Ben Badis. The movement did use Arabic as its language of instruction, and Arabic was also not absent from the so-called Franco-Muslim *lycées*. Nor was the FLN able, immediately after its victory in 1962, to reverse the situation. Arabic was installed fairly soon in areas which don't matter too much (justice, the humanities), but not in areas which do matter (the sciences, oil, real administration). The completion of the Arabization process was the fruit of a long, costly and heroic *Kulturkampf*, comparable to the Hebraicization of Israel, and similarly motivated, by a national imperative. The Algerians succeeded where the less powerfully motivated Irish failed. The Irish only secured puritanism but not the recovery of the national language; the Algerians attained both.

It is also quite untrue that the FLN ever absorbed the whole of Algerian civil society. It monopolized what mattered (state, army, oil, gas), leaving the small change of the economy and moral legitimacy to the new petty bourgeoisie, which had replaced the *pieds-noirs*, and to reformist religion. This division of labour and of powers, reminiscent of the Mamluk past, eventually failed, and a civil society of a characteristically Muslim kind, without political power, but with independent control of the ultimate (religious) sources of legitimacy, in the end dared turn against the technocrats-janissaries. It won the elections, and it may yet win power. Anyone taking his picture of the Algerian cultural and political development from Said would be badly misled. Said also blames Camus for claiming that the Algerian nation had never existed, but omits to say that this remark had also been made by Ferhat Abbas, the nominal (though not effective) leader during the run-up to victory of the Algerian FLN movement.

It is strange how very much Said misses out. There is no mention, for instance, of a moving account of what it felt like to be an Algerian Muslim, namely Malek Bennabi's *Témoin du siècle*. The most intriguing nineteenth-century case of the pursuit of identity, Ismail Urbain, half-French, half-Caribbean and champion of Algerian Muslims under Louis Napoléon, and thus a clear predecessor of Fanon, does not appear. Nor does Ch. R. Ageron's standard and excellent work on the Algerians under French rule. Jacques Berque's memoirs, a splendid account of what it was to be a *pied-noir* slowly converted to anti-colonialism, is likewise absent. That book conveys the intercultural sexuality ("the two communities only met in the *Quartier réservé*") and a sense of provinciality. Unlike Camus, and despite his anti-colonialist metaphysics, Berque was never fully incorporated by the Paris mandarins, even with a professorship at the Collège de France. No sign either of Ali Merad's two remarkable books on the Reformist movement which totally transformed Algerian culture, in effect created Algerian identity, and made the revolution possible; yet Said's is meant to be a book about culture and imperialism and resistance! Likewise, no mention of Fanny Colonna's study of Algerian schoolmasters under colonialism, which describes so well how the Algerians had to wend their way between traditional, Reformed and French educational systems: a book which really lays bare the realities of living between a set of cultures, one old, one self-transforming and one alien. The disregard of the concrete realities of Algeria, the barely restrained indulgence in a kind of metaphysical projection of an abstract theme, would make it exceedingly difficult to defend Said against the charge that he is indeed an Orientalist, in the negative sense he has himself bestowed on the term.

The most interesting of all French novels about North Africa (which, as it happens, conflates Morocco and Algeria), Montherlant's *La Rose de Sable*, is similarly unmentioned. It should have been a kind of "Passage to Algeria", but for the fact that Montherlant did not publish it in the 1930s, when he had written it, claiming retrospectively that he did not wish to weaken France at a moment when war with Hitler was imminent. At the time, he only published a small part of it, dealing with a cross-cultural love-affair, publishing the rest only when the battle of decolonization was over. Yet he claimed that he had made no changes, so that the novel represents his true views as they were even before the battle was decided, and that this can be checked by consulting the original manuscript in the appropriate Paris library. As Montherlant was not famous for truthfulness, I had always hoped that someone would indeed check this, and who more qualified than an anti-Orientalist? The love-affair in *La Rose de Sable* is moving (though marred by the implausible assumption that it is possible to have a liaison in an oasis without the entire oasis knowing of it), and differs from Gide's activities in Biskra not only by being heterosexual, but also by liberating the hero, not from puritanism, but from colonialism. So why is it missing from *Culture and Imperialism*? Both its contents, the circumstances of its publication and non-publication, and possible changes in its content in the wake of shifts in political climate, could hardly be more relevant to Said's theme.

Personally, I miss, most of all, the absence of those great summits of French anthropology in the Maghreb, Émile Masqueray and Robert Montagne. The ideas of the former (the man himself is, unjustly, forgotten) live on through Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard and have enhanced our understanding of human society. Is that to be castigated as Orientalism? The latter is particularly interesting from the viewpoint of Said's problem. Montagne was unquestionably a colonialist, a naval officer who entered scholarship through military (ethnographic) intelligence. What he said about the Berbers was that they both were, and were not, like "us" Europeans: notwithstanding obvious superficial features, their society does not resemble our Middle Ages, but it does resemble the ancient Greeks. Most Europeans, I suspect, are more proud of the *polis* than of the baron's keep, as their institutional ancestor. Was Montagne guilty of Orientalism? I happen to think he just got it right.

Said writes well, though not always lucidly, and his comments on the involvement of literature with society are interesting. His heart is in the right place, at least when he urges us not to freeze people in their social categories. In the end, we are all human. But the central undercurrent of his work is that some of us are, in virtue of our historic position, condemned to travesty others: ". . . culture played a very important, indeed an *indispensable* role. At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism." (emphasis mine) Was this so? Montagne was a colonialist, but he got it right, Fanon was an anti-colonialist, but was closer to metaphysics than to the peasantry. Gide was a critic of colonialism, but his Algeria is simply an erotic fantasy. Sartre was anti-colonialist, but was brazenly willing to suppress the truth about gulags so as to protect his darling French working class from emotional discomfort. Truth is not linked to political virtue (either directly or inversely). To insinuate the opposite is to be guilty of that very sin which Said wishes to denounce. Like the rain, truth falls on both the just and the unjust. The problem of power and culture, and their turbulent relations during the great metamorphosis of our social world, is too important to be left to lit crit.

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